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In Memory of a Friend

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IN MEMORY OF A FRIEND

Martha J. Burke

Her name was Kate Alston and I have no idea what her maiden name might have been. We met at Burrwood, a home for the blind on Long Island, in perhaps 1960/1. Both Kate and I were volunteers and we looked forward to our days spent at Burrwood. It was a very happy place.

Kate was in charge of the big floor looms. I was in charge of the braided rug department. All our products were used by historical societies and/or restorations where either type of product was fitting. It gave the blind people great joy to know that "their rug" was on the floor of one old house or another.

As time passed Kate decided that she needed a sighted person to sometimes rewarped a loom and she taught me. I also got called to repair break downs. Teamwork saved valuable time but we never had time for idle chit-chat.

Now Kate had a most distinguished hat which she almost always wore on cold days. It was a Tyrolean hat in an odd brown color and had several feathers on one side among which was one long curving feather. Sighted volunteers often teased about the hat. Many asked where she got it and there was never any reply.

One morning Kate arrived wearing the hat and her first words to me were, "Well, I really did it last night." Kate had gone to her first Audubon Society meeting and she had worn the hat. She was met with a collective gasp. Realizing one should not wear bird feathers to an Audubon meeting, I laughed and teased about where had she ever gotten that hat.

Residents of Burrwood ate their lunch in the dining room of the mansion and the volunteers ate lunch in the solarium. It was a lovely glass room overlooking Long Island Sound and even in the dead of winter the flowers bloomed. It just so happened that on the day she told me about her adventure the night before, Kate and I found ourselves the last two persons in the solarium.

All of a sudden she said she would tell me where she had gotten her hat if I promised never to mention it again nor to tell anyone else. Kate may have known that I had been in the Navy during World War II and knew the rules about loose talk.

Kate's story went like this. She had graduated from college with a degree in languages. She began her career teaching language in high school. When the war broke out in 1941, she decided she could do more than teach school. Therefore, she went to Washington and immediately got a job with the O.S.S. (C.I.A.) as a cryptographer. She was assigned to the job of breaking German codes as supplies and shipments across the North Atlantic were being hit by the U-boats. I am almost certain Kate gave the year 1943 when something went wrong with the United States' ability to break Germany's new code. Kate and two young men were dropped by parachute behind German lines in an effort to solve the code problems. It was during that tour of duty that Kate got the hat.

Anyone reading this might have a pre-conceived idea of what a spy was like. Wrong. Kate was rather tall and willowy. Her hair had no distinct color and was very fine. Because of her hair's texture, Kate once said she had long ago given up any idea of fashionable hair styles and wore her long, rather light brown hair drawn up in a bun on the top of her head. Kate might have been blond as a child.

To my way of thinking, anyone who met her would immediately know she was a lady with a fine background. The last person in the world one would even consider for the job of spy. Maybe spy isn't the right word but again, Kate was in Germany to solve the problem of the German code.

Somewhere in time, Kate learned how to loom and owned a large floor loom in her home on which she always had a project going. She also painted tin as a hobby. She lived on a large North Shore property and kept Mexican burros as one might collect horses. She said she loved the little critters.

Kate was a great lady who undertook a very risky task for her country. May she rest in peace.

